

# 131. Church Family Disputes (1 Cor. 8-10)

## Study Guide

### Overview

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NOTE: [1 Cor. 7](#) is discussed with [1 Cor. 11](#), in study guide 133. Women in the Church Family ([1 Cor. 7](#); [1 Cor. 11](#)).

The Corinthian church was troubled by many problems. There were cliques and divisions, and there was immorality. Now we discover that the believers in Corinth were also divided over a doctrinal issue!

In [1 Cor. 5](#) we saw that to maintain the unity and purity of the local congregation, God calls on us to discipline brothers and sisters who habitually sin. But what do we do to maintain unity when doctrinal differences emerge?

This passage gives us a surprising answer. We are to admit the fact that one side or the other will be more "right" in their belief. But who is "right" is not the most important issue! No matter who is "right" we are to maintain harmony by affirming love, and by refusing to let our disagreements force us into opposing camps. The "right" and the "wrong" are to continue to live together as members of a caring family!

How is this possible? The answer is found in these important Corinthian passages you are called to teach.

### Doctrine

◆ The Greek word simply means "teaching." It is found 21 times in the New Testament, 15 in the Pastoral Epistles. Typically it means divinely communicated content, binding on the Christian community as God's truth.

### Commentary

It seems peculiar. In a faith that claims to possess truth, Paul insisted on protecting the right of brothers and sisters to be wrong!

This is actually what we discover in this powerful section of 1 Corinthians. Among the issues raised by the folks at Corinth, and carried to Paul by Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus ([1 Cor. 16:17](#)) was a doctrinal dispute. The church appealed to Paul to settle the dispute, by telling them which side was right.

Paul settled it. But by explaining how such disputes are to be dealt with! Paul was careful not to give either side a club with which to bludgeon the other. Something else, Paul taught, was involved in the doctrinal conflict; something that takes priority because it is more important than being "right." When we grasp what Paul is teaching here, you and I and our group members will have a very necessary guide for us in modern times.

We need to remember that the New Testament church broke into the Hellenistic world with a Gospel of revolutionary truth *and* with a revolutionary relationship: love. The impact of the church was related to both truth and love, and to the fulfilled promise of personal transformation. It is to be the same in our century: the message of God is to be communicated, and the power of the Gospel is to be demonstrated in a loving community, peopled by transformed individuals.

Truth, love, and transformation are all essential.

But what happens then when there is a disagreement in Christ's body over truth? What happens when we are forced by our convictions to disagree, not over favorite leaders (as in [1 Cor. 1-4](#)), but to disagree over truth itself? Is there any way to preserve love in such a dispute?

At most times in church history the answer has been, "Contend for the truth. Break with those who are not doctrinally 'pure.'" A few times the answer has been, "Emphasize love. Surrender truth for the sake of harmony." But each of these solutions is wrong! Each short-circuits the dynamic of the body of Christ. In New Testament times and in our own it is the *852harmonious* testimony of truth, love, and transformation that has provided compelling evidence of the reality of Christ, and has overwhelmed the defenses of pagan cultures.

Our solution to the problem of doctrinal differences *must* affirm truth. But it must also maintain love, and facilitate personal transformation. And it is the pattern for just such a solution that Paul offered in [1 Cor. 8-10](#).

## **Cultural Background**

Before summarizing the thrust of this passage in a paraphrase, it's helpful to point out that the confusion in Corinth was compounded by the fact that there were *two* problems linked with this dispute over "food sacrificed to idols" ([1 Cor. 8:1](#)).

Leon Morris, in *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans), helps us understand why this issue was so important to the believers in the first century.

First, it was an accepted social practice to have meals in a temple or in some place associated with an idol. "It was all part and parcel of the formal etiquette in society" (Moffatt). The kind of occasion, public or private, when people were likely to come together socially was the kind of occasion when a sacrifice was appropriate. To have nothing to do with such gatherings was to cut oneself off from most social intercourse with one's fellows. . . . Secondly, most of the meat sold in the shops had first been offered in sacrifice. Part of the victim was always offered on an altar to the god, part went to the priests, and usually part to the worshipers. The priests customarily sold what they could not use. It would be very difficult to know for sure whether

meat in a given shop had been part of a sacrifice or not. Notice that there are two separate questions: taking part in idol feasts, and the eating of meat bought in shops, but previously part of a sacrifice.

What should the Corinthian Christians do? Not go to dinner at friends' homes because the food served there would have been offered previously to pagan gods or goddesses? (Actually, Paul had taught in [1 Cor. 5:9-12](#) that believers were *not* to cut themselves off from pagan contact—even with idolators.) As for the Christian's own homes, the temple meat markets were the normal places to shop. Should a Christian become a vegetarian?

In struggling with this issue, the Corinthians rightly went back to basic truths. They searched the truths revealed by God (Christian teaching, or doctrine) for guidelines. But different people came up with different answers! This truly became a doctrinal issue—not just a matter of personal conviction. It divided many in the church, and the dispute became so sharp that the parties appealed to Paul, asking him to tell them who was right.

Many commentators feel that Paul, in writing his answer, actually quoted from their own arguments. Here are phrases which seem to most to represent the doctrinal views that led one party to the conclusion that both the social practice and shopping at a temple meat market were acceptable.

- Doctrinal argument one: "An idol is nothing at all in the world" ([1 Cor. 8:4](#)).
- Doctrinal argument two: "Food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do" ([1 Cor. 8:8](#)).

In fact, these arguments are strong, and they reflect something of the spiritual growth of those who made them! God is *One!* All the gods and goddesses that the Corinthians had once feared and tried to appease, or had worshiped in the unlikely expectation of some kind of aid, did not even exist! These believers were freed from the emptiness of that whole system! They now laughed at the lumps of stone and metal that had once held them in bondage. When they attended social events, and idols were honored, the Corinthians felt only joy that they knew the true and living God, and dismissed the idolatry as empty and meaningless. Those who objected to their participation seemed to these men and women, so thrilled by the truth they now knew, to still be in bondage to false beliefs about pagan gods and goddesses that a Christian should discard.

As for food, this party also realized that all the rituals by which they once tried to please the gods were meaningless. Their relationship with Christ was a living reality, a vital, personal transaction. What a person eats or doesn't eat fails to delight God. It is 853what is in our hearts, not in our stomachs, that is Jesus' concern (see [Matthew 15:17-20](#)).

So this party in Corinth, basing their practices on what seemed to be sound doctrinal reasoning, participated in social idolatry without a qualm of conscience. They were right in their doctrine. And Paul gently agreed with their insights. But then Paul went on to show them how it is possible to be "right" and still be wrong!

● **Link to Life 1: Youth / Adult**

Your group members need the background given above to help them understand these important chapters. So begin with a minilecture. Then, if you are using the 5-Step inductive study approach, give your group members five minutes to read their paraphrases and make any changes the new data may suggest.

Then distribute a copy of the paraphrase in the text to each, and have group members pair off to (1) compare their paraphrases and the author's, and then (2) agree on at least two key points that Paul makes in dealing with this dispute.

## Tracing the Argument

It is difficult to summarize paragraphs so packed with ideas as some are in this section of 1 Corinthians. But your group members' paraphrases may read something like this:

The Right to Be Wrong

[\(1 Cor. 8-10\)](#)

Let's begin thinking about this idol question in terms of *love* rather than *knowledge*. Beginning from knowledge, we do conclude that idols are nothing. But this isn't the customary view. Someone might be led by your example at an idol feast to eat against his conscience. If you thus damage a brother for whom Christ died, *that* is a sin against the Lord Himself.

Look, you know I'm an apostle. As such, I too might claim certain rights, such as the right to be supported by you. But I gave up this right, and I work to earn my living. I freely surrender my rights and choose to live as a slave to everyone in order to reach them. It's like an athlete. He gives up many things while in training in order to win the prize. Well, my prize is people.

Now, as to your "knowledge," don't be ignorant of the fact that Israel's experience speaks to us Christians. Idolatry led Israel into all sorts of immorality, and brought on God's judgment. Are you to feel secure in your knowledge of the emptiness of idolatry? Watch out that you don't fall into the common temptations associated with it!

Really, flee idolatry. Our communion is with Christ, and our identity is with those who are one in Him. While idols are nothing, pagan sacrifices are offered to very real demons who are behind the pagan systems. So *don't* participate in idol feasts. Don't insist on your rights and your freedom. Choose what is beneficial to you and others.

But don't make a big issue of meat purchased at temple meat markets. If someone else makes an issue of it—like saying, "This is temple meat!"—then don't eat it, for his sake. God *doesn't* care what's in your stomach, but even eating and drinking can be done to God's glory. In this case, that means considering the impact of your actions on others—Jews, Greeks, and your brothers—and being guided in what you do by concern for their good rather than for the rightness of your position. This is what I do as I follow Jesus, so you follow my example.

What an exciting answer! But to understand it, we need to be sure we grasp several critical points.

## **Keys to Understanding Paul's Argument: 1 Cor. 8-10**

### **Limitations on knowledge ([1 Cor. 8:1-3](#))**

In these chapters Paul was responding to the stance taken by the Corinthians. In the dispute there each side was concerned with only one issue: "Who is right?"

Each party based its conviction that *it* was right on an appeal to revealed truth, and on the belief that it had a better grasp of truth than the other party.

So Paul began with a warning. Approaching *any* issue from the viewpoint of superior knowledge alone is inadequate, and is dangerous. Why? Because each side in the argument will have at least *some* grasp of God's truth ("we all possess knowledge" [[1 Cor. 8:1](#)]). But if we put our emphasis only on knowledge of the truth, we are sure to develop a spiritual pride—pride that we know more and better than others ("knowledge puffs up" [[1 Cor. 8:1](#)]). But in fact any human being's grasp of truth is incomplete ("the man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know" [[1 Cor. 8:2](#)]). Thus the attitude that we know the truth and that we are "right" is not only dangerous, but it is wrong.

In these opening verses Paul established an important fact. *The Corinthians had gone about dealing with the disputed issue in the wrong way!* In their focus on knowledge of God's truth they forgot love! They ignored the imperfection of human understanding, and, in effect, cut themselves off from growth in knowledge, for their pride about what they thought they knew cut them off from learning more!

Well, if the Corinthians' approach was wrong, how *do* we deal with doctrinal disagreements? *Be sure to begin by affirming love.* First, because love is the key to transformation. In the loving family of God, the Holy Spirit works to transform attitudes, values, behavior, understanding—our total personality. *Where there is love in the body, there will be openness to God.* As we open our lives to God, the Spirit guides us into "the knowledge of the truth" ([Hebrews 10:26](#)).

We can visualize Paul's key concept here this way:

In the confrontational approach, each side claims to have a better grasp of the truth than the other. This leads to pride, and encourages a closed mind to aspects of truth not yet grasped. It does not help either side to open up to the Spirit of God for further teaching, and it causes divisions in the body of Christ.

In what we can call the commitment approach, each side affirms its love for and acceptance of the other. Side by side, without false pride, each humbly admits the limitations on human knowledge and concentrates on helping the other love God better. This leads to both sides remaining open to God, and to the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit.

When differences are approached in love, there is no retreat from our community to truth. Instead, there is a deep desire to know truth and to grasp it more fully—together.

### **Paul's rights ([1 Cor. 9](#))**

At first it is a temptation to think that [1 Cor. 9](#) is unrelated to [1 Cor. 8](#). How did Paul move from talking about meat offered to idols, to the subject of apostolic rights?

The connection is this. Paul was highlighting something that the Corinthians had overlooked, an issue that was vitally important even though their dispute was essentially doctrinal. This issue is the *attitude* of those who knew an idol had no real existence, and who thus concluded: "I've got the truth, and according to truth I have a *right* to attend idol feasts and eat sacrificed meat." The attitude suggests that these people believed doctrinal correctness *in itself* justified their behavior.

Paul, however, confronted these believers with a factor they had not considered. Even if they were right about idols, and even if they were able to eat meat at idol feasts with a clear conscience, was their *insistence on exercising their rights* a truly Christian attitude? Which should have priority—our rights, or our brother's well-being? What do we care about most—a good steak dinner, or members of God's family who may not have our "mature" viewpoint?

In [1 Cor. 8](#) Paul concluded that the Corinthians, rather than taking pride in their knowledge of the truth, really should have been ashamed of their lack of concern for others. [1 Cor. 9](#) is a personal illustration: Paul was not just "preaching at" the Corinthians. Paul had himself chosen to give up *his* rights and privileges as an apostle, for their sake!

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### **More truth ([1 Cor. 10](#))**

Cor. 10 grows out of Paul's initial warning that our knowledge of truth is incomplete. He did commend the Corinthians for recognizing that an idol was "nothing at all in the world" ([1 Cor. 8:4](#)). But now Paul pointed out the dangers of idolatry.

As far as participation in idol feasts was concerned, such things had always been associated with immorality. Did a person identified with Jesus think it was right, by participating, to link himself with all that the culture associates with idol feasts? In idolatry there are temptations common to all men: Christians are not exempt ([1 Cor. 10:13](#)).

What's more, while the idols themselves are "nothing at all in the world," idolatry has always been used by demonic powers, which *are* real. Can a Christian, who shares in Communion and drinks "the cup of the Lord," go to an idolatrous feast and "drink . . . the cup of demons too?" ([1 Cor. 10:21](#))

Clearly Paul had ruled that the "go to idol feasts" party was *wrong!* Their claim of a grasp of Christian doctrine was foolish, for they justified their actions on only part of the truth.

Finally Paul shifted focus to deal with the second issue: eating meat that may have been purchased at a temple meat market. Paul pointed out that this was not the same as participating in a festive and idolatrous party which had been dedicated to some pagan god or goddess. If the host at a private dinner party made an issue of the meat having been offered first to an idol, then, for the sake of *his* conscience, the Christian should not eat. But otherwise, Christians shouldn't make an issue of it. Just remember, Paul advised, that while the food in itself is morally neutral, in eating and in drinking, and in whatever we do, we are to seek God's glory, and to be sensitive to what will lead to the salvation of the lost, and to the benefit of our brothers and sisters.

## **Analysis**

There are several vital lessons for us in Paul's handling of this early doctrinal dispute.

### **Begin with a commitment to love**

Even if a brother or sister is wrong doctrinally, we are not released from the obligation to love.

### **Maintain a concern for truth**

Paul kept a balance. He continued to love those on both sides of this issue, but he did not hesitate to make the truth clear, even when it revealed one position to be wrong.

### **Be sensitive to the relational implications of truth**

One side in Corinth was so sure it was right—and sure that orthodoxy gave them the right to participate in idol feasts—that they disregarded *other* truths about relationships in the family. No single truth has priority, but must be held in balance with other truths. Our adherence to one doctrine does not justify ignoring other teachings in God's Word.

### **Don't treat one truth as the whole truth**

We need to look beyond a doctrine that is being disputed, in order to see related truths in Scripture. By building their whole argument on the single truth that idols are nothing, the one faction in Corinth overlooked the reality of demons and the immoral cultural associations of idolatrous celebrations. By overlooking these other relevant truths the "I can eat" party in Corinth was "right," but reached a wrong conclusion.

Keeping these principles in mind can help us today when we have honest doctrinal differences within our congregations.

### **Paul's pattern**

The way in which Paul dealt with error in Corinth was beautiful for its sensitivity and love. Paul even commended those who were wrong, for grasping those truths they had apprehended! Paul also commended them for their "strong" conscience. How wonderful that these men and women were able to cast off the attitude of a lifetime and, on the basis of God's Word as they understood

it, find freedom from idolatrous bondage and fear. Anyone who is aware of the difficulties pagan peoples have with release from such bondage would commend these people too!

So, rather than beginning by saying to the "We can eat" party, "You're wrong," Paul began by commending and affirming them.

In the rest of the discussion Paul kept the focus on the relational, and encouraged all the Corinthians to act for the benefit of their brothers and sisters. Paul let them know he expected as much; that he really believed they cared. Paul did point out that because of two factors (two truths) the one party had overlooked, they were wrong. But at the same time Paul kept his appeal focused on *both* truth and love.

### **Paul's premise**

How did Paul find the freedom to deal with error so gently? How was he able to commend those who were 856wrong, and to actually affirm their right to be wrong?

The answer comes when we realize that Paul operated with a basic premise—a premise that needs to be ours as we live with other Christians. You see, *Paul expected the Corinthians to grow*. He did not insist that everyone be doctrinally correct *now*. Paul knew that in the context of a loving family, in which even the erring brother is worthy of affirmation and concern, spiritual and personal growth *will* take place. As life is opened up to the Spirit of God, He will lead the people of God into all truth.

This premise helps you and me to relate to those who differ doctrinally today. Our brothers—and we too!—are young. We have a long way to grow, and much more to learn. At best, our grasp of truth is incomplete. But if we keep on loving one another, God will bring us by His transforming power to a place where we both have a more complete knowledge of God's wonderful truth.

## **Teaching Guide**

### **Prepare**

Because of the complex nature of the passage and its teachings, you will need to lecture more than usual. Think through the passage carefully, and make notes for your lecture presentation.

### **Explore**

1. If you are using the 5-Step study plan, see "Link to Life 1" for a minilecture and group study plan to launch this group session.
2. Otherwise, begin with a 20- to 30-minute lecture containing these elements:
  - a. Explanation of the cultural background of the dispute.
  - b. Truths the "We can eat" party correctly understood.
  - c. Paul's instructions in [1 Cor. 8-9](#) on how to go about handling a dispute.
  - d. Explanation of the additional truths the "We can eat" party had overlooked, and why they were "wrong" even though "right" about idols being nothing.

- e. Summary of principles to be applied in dealing with modern doctrine disputes.

## **Expand**

1. If using the 5-Step approach plan, follow up comparison of group members' paraphrases with a minilecture quickly covering points c, d, and e in *explore 2*.
2. Divide your group into teams to discuss either the following case history, or another more relevant to your own situation. Here are the instructions:

Imagine that you are a board member in a noncharismatic church, and that several in the fellowship have had a speaking in tongues experience, which they are attempting to share with others. A dispute quickly develops that threatens to split the church.

Determine:

- How might this dispute be handled if approached on the basis of knowledge?
- How might this dispute be handled if approached on the basis of love?
- What truths would you want to consider in addition to any teachings about spiritual gifts?
- What would you expect to be the outcome in your local fellowship? How long would you expect it to take to achieve this outcome?

3. Or assume you are the administrator of a Christian college. Would you invite a Christian with a significantly different doctrinal position to teach or lecture at your school? Why, or why not? How is this situation similar to or different from the local church situation with which Paul dealt?

## **Apply**

Ask each member to identify Christians he or she has regular contact with whom he differs on some point of doctrine. Talk in pairs: "How have you tended to relate to them? How do you think you *should* relate to them? What can you do to put the teaching of these chapters into practice in this relationship?"